Endgame

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Sequel to The Halfway Point. An enemy who knows Raphael's secret strikes at his weakest point. Meanwhile, Donatello tries to deal with the unthinkable when Leonardo's vengeance returns to him from a source neither thought possible.

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Chapter 1

Michelangelo wondered if anyone knew he was missing yet.

Huddled in the corner of the little room, as far into the shadows as he could manage, he must have been a pathetic sight for the gangsters crowding him. He couldn't look at them for long. Seeing their smug faces sent chills up and down his body and cold sweat coursing over his skin.

"Just you wait, little freak. We'll do ya like we did your friend."

Michelangelo's dry tongue touched his parched lips, trying in vain to wet them. His throat was full of sand, or he would have spoken in false bravado. *Yeah, and remember what happened to the guys who did that?*

But that hadn't changed what had happened to Raph, over eight months ago, and it didn't change what they were still going through.

" *You goin' out?"*

Mike glanced over his shoulder, over which was slung a canvas sack, to see Raphael was turned away from the television and peering at him over the back of the couch. "Yeah, just to get groceries."

" *Since when d'you volunteer ta do work around here?" Before Mike could answer, Raph gave a sharp laugh. "Right. Master Splinter finally got sick a' you singin 'Man of Constant Sorrows' while doin' the dishes."*

" *It got me outta the lair, didn't it?" Mike replied with a broad grin.*

" *Yeah, I'm sure that was your intention. Get outta here, freak show." Raph turned back to the television. Mike started for the door. "You want me ta come with ya?" Raph asked him suddenly.*

Mike looked over his shoulder again. Raph was watching him and obviously trying not to look as nervous as he was. It had been this way for the past six months; Raph didn't like one of his brothers going out alone. He didn't really like going out alone himself anymore, even if he did so anyway to prove he could do it. No matter how many times his brothers went out alone, though, Raph was on pins and needles until they returned safely. He had gone from having no interest in training to being nearly obsessed with it, pausing only to eat, sleep, and lose himself in a movie for a few hours a day. Mike knew it wasn't just to have something to do.

Despite his certainty that Raph's fears were mostly needless, Mike found those fears to be somewhat contagious. It would make them both feel better, he knew, if Raph came. But Mike needed to go alone for the same reason Raph did—to prove he didn't need to cower at home or beneath his brothers' watchful eyes. Raph wasn't the only one scarred, or scared, by what had happened. "Nah, I'll be fine. It's just a quick, boring trip. Been on this route a billion times."

Raph nodded slowly and turned back to the television. Mike wondered if his brother's look of disappointment was brought on less by having to sit at home and wait again and more by being denied the chance to run into an enemy this time and prove to himself and everyone else that there was no longer any need to be afraid.

After gleaning the Internet for any information he could have missed about the complications of rape, Donatello had become increasingly worried about something he'd never considered before. He'd looked up every article and hacked into every medical record for Jezimar Moura and James Fraley, and what he'd found had reassured him. No sexually transmitted diseases to pass on to rape victims. That was very, very good. Now he was looking up information about Robert Cole, known among the Purple Dragons as House. What he'd found so far was incredibly disturbing, but not alarming. House had run a website hosted on a free server. It contained amateur pornography taken of various women arranged in terrifying displays

of bondage, torture, and asphyxiation. Oddly, no pictures showed House using the girls himself. Some had the girls with other men, other women, or sex toys, but never House himself. How could he have convinced the girls to go for this? Or...had they agreed to it at all? The looks on their faces weren't all feigned, to Don's eyes.

The newest picture was of a pink-haired girl with gigantic dark eyes. She could have come straight from an anime or manga—an illusion probably created deliberately with fake eyelashes and other makeup tricks. Her legs were twisted painfully apart with her feet tucked behind her head, and her hips looked like they might have been dislocated. Then there were other things...Don quickly clicked the "Back" button, stomach burning.

Disgusted, he left the website. This was far too much for him. He was increasingly glad that House had died. He hadn't heard or found anything redeemable about him. Idly, he wondered what had happened to the girl in that last picture. Had she had medical attention? Was she seeing a therapist for it? Did anyone even care, or did they think she'd been asking for it?

The next thing he found was a transcript of a news report. He scanned it quickly, trying not to think about the girl. He failed, and had to scan the report again. ... *Found with the word "RAPIST" slashed into his forehead. While nothing has been confirmed as to whether or not Cole was in fact a rapist, post-mortem tests revealed that he was--*

Don's heart choked him. He stared at the screen, hardly believing what he saw. His lips parted, and through the tumor in his throat he shrieked, "LEO, GET IN HERE!"

He couldn't have left well enough alone. Mike was probably fine. No need to be running along the route he usually took to and from the grocery store, hoping to run into him and make sure nothing had happened. He could never leave well enough alone. He always had

to follow his brothers when they went out, spying like some...well, like Leo.

He snapped out of his thoughts when he saw a solitary figure on the street below him, highlighted in gold from the street lights. It had the familiar bulge of a shell in the back of its oversized black hoodie, with the hood drawn up over an unseen beanie to hide as many alien features as possible. It walked briskly to the beat of a song it was quietly singing, its hands stuffed into the pockets of the hoodie. Raph gave a half-smile, then smothered it by gritting his teeth in frustration. Mike was making too much noise. Did he want to be caught? He followed silently, watching in his peripheral vision the zebra-stripes of headlights on pavement from a nearby street. All it took was for one of those vehicles to turn down an alley to see an inhuman shape. *Not like we've never dealt with that before,* he tried to assure himself. *Mike can handle himself.*

But this sort of thing killed Raph every time one of his brothers went out. He had the feeling that Leo could tell when Raphael was following, but said nothing, knowing Raph was doing it as much for his own sake as for Leo's. Don he could never read, but he was pretty sure Mike was oblivious to him. Which scared him more than anything.

An abandoned and normal-looking van was parked on one side of the alley. It was whitewashed and looked like it had been rescued from the 1960's. Just behind it was the back door of a brick building, slightly ajar with no light leaking from behind it. Mike was about to pass it. Raph tensed, then forced himself to unwind. *There's no one in there. You're being stupid.* His heart pounded hot blood in his head, teeth grinding and fists tightening. Until Mike passed safely, he wouldn't be convinced. Crouching on the edge of the rooftop, he prepared to leap down at the first sign of trouble.

Mike passed the door and came alongside the van, jamming on an air-guitar and giving a spin.

Raph let out his breath.

The headlights of the van came on at the same instant as the wheels began to spin and the door was flung open.

Raph opened his mouth to warn his brother.

A dark shadow ducked from the van, flung an arm around Mike's neck, covered his mouth with a swatch of dark fabric, and yanked him inside as his knees gave.

The van took off like a rocket before the door even closed.

"MIKE!" shouted Raph.

Raph could see his brother collapse entirely inside the van just as the door closed. He leapt from the rooftop, breaking his fall by catching a windowsill just before hitting the ground and spinning around. The van was turning a corner, exposing on its previously-unseen side a fraction of an utterly, horribly familiar symbol.

Purple Dragons.

They know what happened to me.

They have my brother.

By the time Raph sprinted around the corner, the van was nowhere in sight. He stood in the shadow of a building, knees buckling as he shook, then jolted off at a run after the van he could not see.

A body found in a New York City alley has been identified as that of Robert Leon Cole. The cause of death, according to Chief of Police Bill Damron, was "almost undoubtedly murder." An autopsy revealed a massive wound from a long, edged weapon. The body was found with the word "RAPIST" slashed into the forehead. While nothing has been confirmed as to whether or not Coleman was in fact a rapist, post-mortem tests revealed that he was HIV-positive.

There was no world, only the words.

HIV-positive. House. Raph's House.

Leo's mouth went dry.

"We need to get more of a story from Raph about what happened that night. We have to know--"

It didn't matter. He would die anyway.

"You said they raped him with an object?"

Leo cleared his parched throat as he grew aware that Don's words required an answer. "Yeah. Flashlight. And...and one of them peed on him, but it wasn't House. It was...one of the other ones." He hoped he didn't sound as distant as he felt, staring at those words until they burned into his corneas. HIV-positive. *Oh god, oh god.*

"Leo?"

Leo's blood was running cold, and he barely remembered to breathe. "Huh?"

"You okay?"

A crimson wave, overcoming his vision, stinging his eyes, the resistance and give of severed muscle and bone, sword lancing through heart, warm flood of salt and metal, everywhere. A look of shock, realized underestimation, or perhaps overestimation, frozen on a dying man's face. Leo lifted his hands to his own face, and he could feel it, the sticky slime of congealing

" *Blood.* "

"What?" Don looked alarmed. "Did Raph...did he come in contact with House's blood, or do you know?"

"Not Raph," whispered Leo. "Me."

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Chapter 2

Waking up was like dreaming. His eyes were glued shut with drugged sleep, he was paralyzed to his fingertips, and his brain could only try to register his current situation. His mind came to life faster than his body, and he forced his weighted eyelids open, lips parting to take in a quick breath to get his heart moving faster. He was lying face-down on the floor of a thrumming, swaying vehicle that his arms seemed to sink into. Captured. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* Undefined shadows and shapes burst into a flurry of motion before his bleary eyes. He heard voices and movement around him, and before he could quite manage to his hands and knees, his face was again smothered with a pungent-smelling washcloth— *Oh god, not again*— and Michelangelo collapsed into darkness.

"Hello. You have reached the voice mailbox of Leonardo. I am not able to come to the phone at the moment--"

"Hi, you've reached Don. I'm unavailable right now--"

"Sorry, the person you have dialed is out of service, or is no longer avail--"

"Hi, you've reached April's cell phone. I'm not--"

"Casey Jones here, you know what to do." *Beep.*

"Casey," Raph said breathlessly into the phone through his gritted teeth, legs pumping even as he spoke, "You'd better pick up if you're there. Mikey's in trouble. Meet me at Purple Dragon HQ. I think that's where they took him." He'd left nearly identical messages for Leo, Don, Splinter, and April just seconds ago. *The universe must think it's damned funny that everyone I need right now ain't "available at the moment,"* his mind growled as he hung up the phone and crammed it into his belt. He was back on the rooftops, scouring the

route he was taking for any sign of the conspicuous van that held his brother.

They'd taken Mikey, of all of them. *The only good thing about all this is that it didn't happen ta you.*

" *Whatcha doin', Raphie?*

" *Nothing. Don't call me Raphie."*

" *Is that a Transformer?"*

" *No."*

" *Cool! Can I play with it?"*

" *No, you'll break it! MIKEY!"*

" *Please?"*

" *LET GO!"*

" *Pleeeease?"*

" *MIKEY! YOU STUPID IDIOT, LOOK WHAT YOU DID!"*

" *Well, if you'd just let me--"*

" *Go away!"*

" *I'm sorry, okay? I'll fix it!"*

" *No you won't. GO. AWAY." God, Mikey, why do you always have to make things worse?*

" *What is it?"*

" *Look what I made you."*

" *I'm not interested."*

" *Look. It transforms into a truck."*

" *What?"*

" *See? I worked on it all afternoon."*

It was made out of paper. A Transformer toy, cleverly folded so it actually transformed. If Raphael had been older, he might have understood the value of such craftsmanship, but as a child, he only knew that it wouldn't replace his broken plastic version. It was paper, and therefore worthless. Paper could be torn, burned, destroyed. He crumpled it in his fists and threw it at his brother.

" *Go. Away."*

When Mike woke up again, he didn't move or change his breathing pattern. He listened.

"When did you take him?" rumbled a vaguely familiar voice.

"'Bout a hour ago," replied a gravelly one.

"He was the only one?"

"Yeah, walkin' down where we seen 'em before. Didja want another one?"

There was a pause. "No. This one will bring the others."

The drug's tentacles loosened just enough for Mike to place a name to that familiar voice. It was Hun. The leader of the Purple Dragons was gigantic, but not stupid. How long could Mike keep up his act of sleeping before Hun called his bluff? Fortunately, the drugs still weighed him down, eyelids, limbs, and all, so acting was barely required. In fact, he felt himself drifting off again. He couldn't fall

asleep, though, while Hun and his minion spoke above his head, their voices doubled in volume by the drug ringing in his ears.

"Did you leave clues?" Hun asked quietly.

"I sent Buzz back ta leave part of a jacket. They'll know where he is, but uh, how do we keep 'em from knowin' it's a trap?"

"They'll know it's a trap. That isn't an issue. As long as we know more than they do, it doesn't matter."

"What if they don't come?"

"They'll come. Even if they don't, we have one of them already. This one's the easiest to control with fear. If they don't come for him within the hour, we'll kill him, and the others won't know until they arrive."

"Um."

"Yes?"

"Why keep him that long, boss? If they don't know the difference--"

"Because that gives my men fifty-six minutes to do whatever they want with him. Just wait till he's awake, and be sure the monitor is on. I want to be able to watch."

"Whatever they want, like, what House did with the other one?"

"Anything they want. As long as he suffers."

Suffers... Mike knew he would be able to register just how deep a pile of crap he was in once the drug wore off, but for now, it seemed best to keep pretending.

"And Congo--"

"Yeah?"

Mike could hear the smile in Hun's voice. "Don't worry too much if he dies by 'accident.'"

Hun's footsteps pounded in Mike's ears, fading gradually until silence was left behind. Sleep covered him again, and he willingly fell into it. Whatever was in store for him, he didn't want to be conscious for it.

Raph had had a few bad spells since coming home from his retreat with Casey. This was the worst one so far.

Don grappled with his brother, hooking and locking his arms under his brother's and pulling back as Leo tried to pry his sai from his resisting fingers. There was no coherent thought, no logical line of defense running through his mind, but a mantra of "No no no no no no" filed through his mind like a video clip on a loop. Raph, for once, wasn't going all out, wasn't lashing out to defend his possession of his weapons, but his knuckles were white, and he spoke through his teeth.

" *You don't get it. You—you haven't thought it...Leo, this is the only—STOP! Lemme—This is the only way, you gotta trust me, this'll make it all..."*

Somehow, Donatello managed to catch a glimpse of Raphael's face. Later, when Raph was in the hands of their sensei, Don lay in his bed and pondered that face. It hadn't been at all insane or wild, just upset and...enlightened. He had been so earnest when he had pleaded with Leonardo that this was the only way, that this would solve everything, that they needed to trust him. It had been like his brother had believed he was seeing things clearly for the first time.

Leo had a look on his face much too similar to that one.

"Are you okay?" Don ventured tentatively. He knew what Leo would say, and he also knew the real answer. Don's own mind was helplessly flashing forward. *He won't be able to fight again, if he has this. He can't get a paper cut. A cold will kill him.*

Leo closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Yeah, I think so. A...warrior is always prepared for his own death." His tongue darted out to wet his lips, revealing the lie in his bravado. "Except with this, I can't fight, can I?"

"Leo--"

"If I get hurt--"

"Leo, we don't even know if we can contract HIV."

That look of grim enlightenment didn't vanish, but another light sparked in Leo's eyes. "Oh. Right." The line of his shoulders eased. "How can we know?"

Don sighed and rubbed his temples. "There's a quick test we can do, but we need the equipment for it. It's an oral fluid test that takes about twenty minutes to give a result." He'd learned of this during his preparatory research prior to investigating the medical history of Raph's attackers.

"For HIV?"

Don nodded.

"Where-where can we find this thing?"

God, that stutter speaks volumes. Leo, the understated brother, rarely showed such a break in calm. "Hospitals. Or maybe a warehouse somewhere where they keep them stocked. I can probably do some research and find something, and we can go out tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow. Do you think...?

The way Leo was looking at him made Don clack his teeth together. His brother was visibly anxious, which meant he must be going crazy. And he was genuinely asking Don if he wanted to wait. But more than that, Don felt his own heart flutter, his own mouth go dry,

all the words in his mind jumbling into a mass he would never sort through until he had something besides speculation. "No. Dammit, Leo, even if you can wait, I sure as hell can't sit still until I know for sure. It'll kill me."

Leo hesitated. The twin gleams in his eyes diminished and flattened, and he nodded briefly in acknowledgment. "It'll kill one of us."

Chapter 3

There was an explosion of pain in Michelangelo's face. His eyes opened, but he wasn't quite awake. There was a face before him when the sparks in his eyes cleared—a boy, no older than himself, with a rough scar over his left eye and a purple dragon tattooed along his jaw. Mike opened his mouth, perhaps to speak, though he was too drugged to be sure. He was struck again, the pain amplified by the drug-induced drowsiness.

"You awake, bitch?" snarled the boy.

Yes, actually, he was, the more he thought about it. The drug was wearing off quickly now that his eyes were open and he was being hit repeatedly. Oddly, though his mind was awake, his limbs were just as heavy and useless. Oh, that's because there were these chains. Attached to his wrists and ankles. They were heavy, too. Mike blinked hard to clear his eyes, his tongue dashing out to run over a new cut on his lip. He was chained up in a dimly lit room, and this kid wasn't alone. Surrounding him were ten or twelve other gangsters. *All for little old me?*

Yes, all for you.

Mike's stomach clenched. *You shouldn't have.*

As the gravity of the situation settled on him, the boy pulled back with a grin. That scar...he must have picked at that thing for it to become that prominent. He was probably pretty proud of it. Mike struggled to sit up and realized with a start that the kid was straddling him.

" *Because that gives my men fifty-six minutes to do whatever they want with him."*

" *Whatever they want, like, what House did with the other one?"*

No way, no, no, no, no. That can't happen to me. Not me. Visions of Raphael as he had been for the past eight months slammed into his brain, one at a time. Raph rummaging for a spoon and suddenly forgetting what he was doing. Raph staring blankly at a television screen. Raph immobilized by a sudden flashback. Worst of all, no Raph at all, but a month of silence, a month of no Raph, an invisible Raph, Raph as a ghost haunting his family for their failures.

If it can happen to him, it can happen to me.

" *I ain't a hero, Mikey. You...ya shouldn't think a' me like that. It'll getcha down every time I fail."*

" *What...NO! Fuck, Raph, you...you came OUT of it."*

" *I ain't out of it yet."*

" *But you got this far. I don't think I could do that."*

Mike's throat moved, struggled to keep from speaking to someone who wasn't there. *I couldn't do that. I'm not strong. I'm not Raph. I'm shaking and terrified and weak and these guys haven't even done anything. If this happened to me, I'd kill myself.*

"You got a lot to pay for, freak," snarled a voice from behind him. "That's five of ours you killed."

"I didn't--" But there was no reason to protest that Casey, Leo, and Raph had been the ones actually doing the killing, and that was all after Raph had been brutally raped and almost killed. *Holy shit, I'm part of some cycle of vengeance, and I didn't even do anything!*

The boy leaned in and struck at him again, but Mike instinctively caught his fist before it connected and twisted, his movements slowed by the chains. *I have to get out of this alive* , his mind screamed at him as his other trembling hand did something of its own volition—it wrapped the chain connected to his wrist around the boy's throat, pulling it tight enough to be a threat. He saw an instant's

worth of an astonished, frightened look before he jerked to his feet, dragging the boy with him. There was movement around him. He pulled the chain tighter, and the boy gagged.

"GET BACK!" Mike shouted. *Oh god, oh god, I'm taking a hostage. I'm going insane. They'll never fall for this.*

The boy's breathing was sharp and ragged in his ears. Otherwise, the room was utterly silent.

Then, a calm voice. "He's bluffing."

Their selected warehouse was only a few miles away, but Don, stuck at a red light and staring at the GPS he'd installed in the truck, felt like he would never get there. Leo sat in the passenger seat, head leaned back against the head rest and his eyes closed. Meditating. Just like Raph had done immediately after being raped, for four days straight. It had been identical to a coma, only he hadn't been asleep. Nowadays Raph was more prone to taking time out for meditation, although Don suspected it wasn't the absence of thought so much as the organization of thought—one of the ways in which Raph had already grown from his horrific experience. Not that he wasn't still Raph, but that he at least tried.

Leo hadn't stopped meditating since he'd buckled his seat belt. Don was worried.

They had told Splinter they were going out. Their sensei had been quietly reading a Stephen King novel in his room, and knowing how Splinter valued his quiet time, Don didn't want to disturb him. He and Leo had agreed that there was no reason to worry Splinter if they had nothing to back up their suspicion. They would test Leo, and then, whatever the results were, explain the situation to their family.

The light turned green, and Don depressed the gas pedal. Raph had been defiled, violated, and now perhaps the same thing had happened to Leo, only in a different, deadlier way. *Please no. Not*

this. In a sense, maybe Leo had come out of this more affected than any of them, if he was infected. *Not possible. We're not even human. It's not worth thinking about. We should turn around and go home and forget about it.*

Except I can't.

Maybe Leo was even more affected than Raph now. It seemed a ridiculous thought, because Don's most vivid memory was the sight of Raphael lying motionless in the bathtub, the water sweeping off curtains of filth and the rank of blood and urine, with strands of crimson dissipating from a pool between his thighs and surrounding his leg. But about two weeks ago, Leo had come to him, concerned.

" *Don?"*

" *Yeah?"*

" *I'm...wondering if this is typical, okay? I can't give you details, but I need an answer."*

" *O...kay."*

" *Raph had a nightmare last night. He talked a little about it, and...I shouldn't have said anything, I know, but I mentioned something he'd told me about the rape months ago. He didn't know what I was talking about, and not in the way where I could tell he was just denying it. He really didn't know. I mean, I've done the research you have, and...did you ever find anything about repression occurring months after the event?"*

" *I wouldn't think it would be impossible. I...I don't think it's anything we should worry about. The more he forgets, the better."*

" *Right. It's just..."*

Leo hadn't finished, but Don understood. Leo knew events of the rape that Raph had forgotten. Since the rapists were all dead, Leo

knew more about what had happened than anyone now, and it was a burden to him that he was unwilling to place even a part of on anyone else. Don sometimes considered that to be twisted, but he knew it was not—it was Leo's noble, self-sacrificial side, overruling all else in order to protect his brothers. It was one of Don's least favorite parts of Leo, but he could never label it as a bad thing. It was good and brave and noble and right and Don hated it.

Don's hands tightened on the steering wheel. He wished he could meditate now.

He depressed the brake pedal, swerved the truck into an empty space at the curb, put it in park, and turned off the engine. Leo's eyes didn't open.

"We're here," Don said softly.

Leo's eyes still didn't open. He didn't react at all for a few seconds. Then, he inhaled deeply and hissed the air out until his lungs were empty. Only then did he open his eyes.

"Then let's do it," he said quietly.

Oxygen hissed in and out, in and out of Raphael's body. His breathing was raspy now. He wasn't even in disguise, but he didn't care as he leapt into the bed of a truck just before it entered the Lincoln Tunnel. Purple Dragons had taken his brother, and he had been to Dragon Central before. He could only hope they had actually taken him there, and not one of any number of hideouts they had in New York. It was that large, conspicuous building in New Jersey that branded itself into his mind, in the center of the map of his world. He had to get there, and he had to get there soon.

Not just for Mikey's sake. Raph still remembered more than he wanted to remember of rough asphalt against his face, of laughter and mockery and the taste of blood and filth and oil.

" *Mikey, the only good thing about all this is that it didn't happen ta you. I couldn't a'...I couldn't a' handled it. Not bein' able ta stop it."*

" *You wouldn't've let it happen. So it's moot. No 'what if.' It just wouldn't've happened to me."*

" *You say that. But those guys took me down pretty quick."*

" *If I remember right, they blundered the whole operation and had to go back later for another try. If they took you down, it was by accident. You've...you've got me outta real tight spots before. Got all of us out of 'em, even. That shows you can do it."*

No. The only thing it showed was that Mike was too dependent, too naïve, and a little unfair, placing all this pressure on Raph. *I couldn't keep it from happening to me. I can't keep it from happening to him.* He curled in the bed of the truck, hiding from the lights and the eyes of the drivers in the many vehicles surrounding him. *I'm not strong enough. I can't protect anyone.*

But you're trying anyway.

Yeah, 'cause I have to. Right now, he's sittin' there, thinkin' I'm gonna come for him any second, and I can't let him down.

You're not strong enough to handle it happening to him.

No. I'm damned either way. But I ain't goin' down, I ain't lettin' him down unless I did everything first.

Including dying?

Damn right.

Chapter 4

One of the gangsters lunged for Mike. The nozzle of an aerosol spray looked huge.

The aerosol hit Mike, but he held his breath. It wasn't pepper spray. It might have been some sort of sedative, as his hostage suddenly went limp and heavy in his arms. Mike jerked backwards, tightening the chain around his victim's neck. His heart was pounding, but he was taking in no oxygen to feed it. *Air! I need air!* But there was more spraying from the aerosol, and he couldn't let himself breathe as he struggled to escape it and still maintain control of his hostage. *Can't let them control me. Can't let them win. Can't let them take me.*

Oh god. They used a flashlight on Raph. What'll they use on me?

Hun didn't care if he lived. The others didn't know he was here. Mike was Mike's only hope.

The aerosol paused for half a second, and he gasped in a short breath of air before it began to hiss again. Dimly, his pounding ears heard voices.

"He can't hold out forever. Keep going."

"Just kill him already. It ain't worth this."

"I wanna have fun with him first. He's a twitchy one. I wanna see how loud he screams."

Mike was starting to see spots. He backed up enough to give his chains some slack, then used the arm not holding a chain around his hostage's neck to fling a length of chain at the one with the aerosol. The spray stopped abruptly as he felt the chain hit flesh and heard a sudden curse. He backed up further, gasping in air to feed his starved lungs, and bumped into someone behind him. Without thinking, he flung a chain backwards. There was a strangled cry

behind him—the impact resounded back through the chains enough to tell him he hit a skull. Mike jerked backwards, crushing the man between his shell and the wall as hard as he could. *Gotta get out. I have to live. I have to be okay.* He trembled so hard he wondered how he still managed to keep hold of the contents of his stomach, let alone his hostage. *I'm the only one who can keep me okay. I have to do what it takes. I have to get back to my family. I have to get out of this.*

If it happened to Raph...

Then there was fire. Agony, beginning at his thigh and ending nowhere.

His head snapped back. Every muscle in his body became porcelain, and he involuntarily clutched at his hostage, tightening the chain. He could feel hundreds of tiny pulses tearing through his body as his limbs jerked and spasmed. There was pain all over, in his cranium, in his legs and feet, in his arms and hands and eyes, but most of all, his wrists and ankles were on fire, white-hot, and he could swear he was screaming "Stop, stop!" but didn't hear his own voice, only theirs. Warm wetness ran down his legs and puddled around his feet. The flesh beneath the manacles lit up and crackled, burned, died. It never ended, the relentless torture, not for what felt like hours, or at least the longest thirty seconds of his life. Then it was done, and everything went slack. His knees gave way. The pain was gone from his body, but his wrists and ankles still burned as he collapsed to the floor, barely managing to catch himself. Tears were caught in the rims of his eyelids, and one was jerked free when he hit the concrete floor. His eyes swerved upwards to see the device that had been used on him.

Taser.

"Toldja," said a man behind the one with the taser. "Now do it again."

Every member of the Purple Dragons found out how loud Michelangelo could scream.

If I'm infected, I'll never be able to do this again.

"Okay," Don whispered, shutting the plastic facing on the keypad. "It's unlocked." He placed his hand on the doorknob and met Leo's eyes. "Ready?"

"Yes," Leo said immediately, barely waiting for Don to finish. Don nodded and pushed the door open.

The warehouse was lit only by the lights coming through the windows from the streets. They still stuck to the walls, in case there was some sort of back-up motion-detecting security system in place. Leo followed Don, who seemed to have an idea where they were going. Neither had to remind the other to be quiet. This particular warehouse had no cameras that Leo could spy, but he didn't trust there weren't sound sensors in place. There was, of course, a plethora of boxes stacked up on metal shelving that seemed to go on for miles. Leo had no idea which ones held what they wanted. Fortunately, he could see labels tacked over each shelf. *There is a system in place.*

It didn't take long to find the section holding medical supplies. It took a little longer to find the boxes that held testing supplies. Don refused to let Leo climb them himself. *That's right. I can't get hurt. No blood.*

He shivered.

Leo waited on the floor as Don scaled the shelves. He had barely spoken a word out loud since they had left the lair, but his head ached with words he could never release. Don wouldn't let him talk the way he was thinking. However, it gave Leonardo a sense of order and control amidst the chaos to plan things out, to make various decisions based on each possible outcome, to plan for the best- and worst-case scenarios. It was practical. Practicality kept him sane.

If I'm infected, there will be a new leader. Probably Don. The guys will find the right meds, and in the best of all possible worlds, I'll retire and live peacefully at home for a few years.

He hated the idea of settling down. Hated it. It would mean he wouldn't be a ninja anymore.

If I'm infected and they can't get medication for me, things wouldn't be so prolonged. I'd have to live with it less. If I went out to live on my own, I could even be less careful. I could practice without worrying about hurting myself. I could be a ninja. And when I died, it would be without everyone watching.

He doubted that. Once things got bad, his family would keep checking in on him, and wouldn't leave him until it happened.

If I'm infected, I could kill myself.

That idea sickened him less than the other two.

Don was near the top shelf, grappling with a very large box that was pressed tightly against the next shelf up. *We shouldn't be doing this. The tests will be missed. There will be an investigation.* But he still watched silently as Don struggled to pull the box out. *This is getting ridiculous. We shouldn't have done this. It won't change anything.*

The box suddenly came loose, tumbling past Don. Leo opened his mouth. In slow motion, Don grasped the shelf with one hand and grasped in vain at the falling box.

Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit...

In slow motion, Leo dashed to catch the tumbling box.

In slow motion, Leo was too late.

The box crashed into the floor.

Suddenly, Leo was deafened by the sound of alarm bells.

Mikey never paid attention when Raph was in charge. It was the one thing Raph didn't take personally—Mikey always paid equal inattention to any brother who happened to be in charge at the time. It was more a matter of carelessness than open defiance, as remaining hidden from humans was, to his nine-year-old brain, more of a game than a necessity for survival. Right now, he was getting on Raphael's nerves, probably deliberately, by singing some song he'd heard on television.

"A ram sam sam, a ram sam sam, goolie goolie goolie goolie goolie ram sam sam!" Mikey belted shrilly, despite Raph's furious hushes, childish voice echoing piercingly through the abandoned alley. "A rafi, a rafi, goolie goolie gool--"

Raphael finally clamped his brother's beak shut with a silencing hand. "Shut up, idiot!" he hissed. "You're gonna get us caught!"

In response, Mikey slithered his tongue through his lips and slobbered deliberately on Raph's hand, causing the older brother to jerk away in disgust and wipe the slimed appendage on a knee pad. "By who, dorkface?" snorted Mikey. "There's no one here."

"There will be if you keep making noise," Raph retorted. "People're gonna wonder what died."

"What's dy *ing* , doofus. If it were dead, it wouldn't be making noise."

"Whatever. Look, they're takin' out trash. Let's hide and see what they put out."

They ducked behind a pair of aluminum trash cans and watched a group of four humans emerge from a back doorway into the alley. Raph frowned. Maybe they weren't taking out the trash. They were all shouting, and one of them looked scared, wide-eyed, jaw set, posture that of a threatened man. The other three raised placating hands, one speaking slowly, urging him to calm down. The scared man raised a gun.

"I wanna see!" Mikey whispered excitedly, and ducked from behind the trash can.

"Mikey, no!" hissed Raph, seizing his brother roughly by the shoulders and yanking him back.

"But he's got a real gun!"

"Yeah, and it can really kill you!" Raph squinted at the gun the man was holding, feeling a strange sense of urgency. Splinter didn't know they were topside, and he would definitely kill him if he didn't take care of his brother. Oddly, the gun seemed to grow out of proportion as it was slung wildly through the air by its hysterical wielder, catching the light of the streets and inflating to a size beyond reality. A chill took Raph. The man had a real gun, and it could really kill them.

He tugged Mikey closer.

One of the other men suddenly leapt forward and tackled the armed man to the ground, seizing his wrist and jerking it up over his head. There was a flash of fire and a deafening crack, and the aluminum can hiding Mikey toppled with a monstrous clang of torn and battered metal. Raph heard Mikey's scream louder than anything he had ever heard in his life, and instinctively, he threw his arms around his little brother and pulled him away from the sounds of danger, of bullets hitting frail aluminum and men shouting in alarm as they realized they were not alone.

There were footsteps headed toward them. There was no time to waste. Raph yanked his trembling brother to his feet. Mikey's knees buckled and gave. Raph jerked him up again and clenched his arm in his fist as he ran, clinging to the shadows, dragging his distraught little brother away from the noise, the bullets, the hostile eyes. Another crack ripped through the air, and he could feel its shockwave hit him. After two heartbeats told him neither he nor his brother were hit, he glanced behind and saw black shapes, three standing, one lying motionless on the ground. Dead. He felt ice-cold.

Raph dove into another alley and peeled a manhole cover back, pushing his brother through to safety before entering himself. The sounds of his own footsteps gave way to the hammering of his heartbeat as he descended into the depths of the sewers. Swallowing hard, he gasped a few deeps breaths to slow his heart. Mikey couldn't know how scared he was, how scared he had been back there.

Mikey...

Mikey was crying.

"Raph?"

The gunshot. The aluminum can ringing as it was hit.

Raph turned and seized Mikey by the shoulders, squeezing hard as though he planned to wring the truth from him. "Are you hurt?"

The sniffles and sobs continued. "N-no."

Something in Raph unwound slightly, but not all the way. "You sure? The bullet didn't hit you?"

"No, b-but I could hear it—it was real close."

So close .

Raph drew his weeping brother into his arms as though raising a wall around him, a barrier between Mikey and the universe, the bullets, the shouting men. The world had gone strangely silent in Raphael's ears, in spite of the trickle of water and dull echo of rats scurrying. Mikey's sobs only served to emphasize the hollowness of sound, the futility of the senses, the mystic abstractness of time and space in a world where things ceased to exist without notice.

They had almost been killed tonight.

It was the first time death had ever entered Raphael's world as an entity of truth. The figure motionless on the ground could just as easily have been Michelangelo, and nearly had been. As he clasped his arms around the hard plating of his brother's carapace, he became aware of the fragile veins pulsing through the delicate skin under his jaw, the thin membranes of eyelids fluttering against his bare shoulder, the flesh slipping easily against small, juvenile bones, and the bare whisper of breath against his throat. Even beneath the flex of leather-tough plastron was the desperate work of a heart too easily stopped.

Mikey would be fine in the morning, after the shock passed and the jitters wore off, replaced by his unyielding good humor. He would be just as likely to be killed by his own recklessness then as he had been tonight, and he wouldn't care. Death was not close to him, as it was close to Raphael. But Raphael would give his own life before seeing his little brother cold and nerveless. It was the only conclusion he could come to. Mikey was too careless, too likely to die. Raph had to protect him. That was all there was.

It was the way Raph lived his life until, the summer of his sixteenth year, he found himself unable to protect even himself.

Chapter 5

Michelangelo could count the last few shocks from the taser, although by that point he couldn't remember the names of numbers. The tasing stopped, and air rushed into his burning lungs as he felt them roll him over onto his back. His head lolled painfully over the edge of his carapace, his muscles limp after having been rock-hard. Residual tears escaped the corners of his eyes and dribbled down his temples to be absorbed by his sweat-soaked mask. *Holy shit, I'm about to get raped to death.* The pain was gone, but there was no relief. His eyes squeezed closed as shudders of terror wracked his laboring chest. A sob escaped his throat. *Oh god, I'm so pathetic. I'm about to die and all I can do is cry.*

I can't die! Canticle 2 is coming out next week! I've been waiting for a year!

No more two-player with Don. No more movies with Raph.

No more Don and Raph at all.

Just because I'm too scared to move.

All his life, he would have liked to think he was too strong to crumble under torture. But he'd never expected torture to hurt so much. The pain was gone as quickly as it had come, but even thinking about moving caused ghosts of electricity to crackle under his skin. Rage at himself boiled in his chest, and another sob broke through his teeth, but he couldn't budge. *I'm about to die and I can't move. They'll do it again if I move.*

God, I'm pathetic.

Pain stabbed through his side and the wind was knocked out of him. Someone had kicked him. He curled defensively. Suddenly he was straddled across his plastron and staring up into the face of the

youth he had taken captive. The boy said nothing, only drew back his fist and let fly. Mike jerked, trying to bring his hands up, but his chains were immediately pulled taut. More pain exploded in his face. Again. Again. Stars burst before his eyes. The youth paused to breathe, and that was when Mike saw the key on the lanyard around his neck.

No way.

The boy hit him again, and Mike shouted and spat blood. "Little bitch!" choked the boy. "Hold him for me. I wanna be first."

No!

A large hand clamped over the boy's head and jerked him backwards. "Get outta the way. You gotta earn the right to go first. Where's the, uh, the thing?"

"What thing?" asked one of the gangsters holding the chains binding Mike's arms.

"I ain't fuckin' a turtle. Tell me someone brought something."

"We don't gotta fuck him."

"Let's do it anyway. It'd serve him right. You know what they carved in House's forehead?"

The boy straddling him was glaring at him. Mike met his gaze head-on. The kid couldn't have been older than he was—clean-faced, not even able to grow decent facial hair. *Come on. I'm the same as you. I'm just a kid. I'm scared and helpless like you were just now. Please.*

The boy leaned forward and spat in his face, then crawled backward and sat between his legs.

"MacCool. Get up. You gotta earn it."

The boy glanced up. That lanyard called to Mike. *It's probably just his car key. Is he old enough to drive?* Mike's tongue dashed out, but it lacked the moisture to properly wet his lips. His left foot was free, and in the opposite direction from the way MacCool was facing. A quick glance around told him no one else was looking. *Please let me be a better thief than I think I am. Please, please, please!*

His toes clasped the key dangling from the lanyard. One swift motion had it over MacCool's head. MacCool blinked, then grasped at his chest, finding no key.

"Hold him down," someone said.

MacCool opened his mouth as if to speak.

The chains tightened, forcing Mikey flat.

"MacCool, get outta the way!" A big man shoved the kid aside and grabbed one of Mike's legs, forcing it upwards. Mike's arms strained against the chains holding them, his burned and blistered wrists slick with sweat.

Holy shit. Holy shit.

His harsh breathing quickened and grew to a deafening wheeze in his own ears.

No .

There was no hesitation, no pause to regroup or prepare. The flunkies guarding the door saw him coming like a hydrogen missile. It didn't even enter his mind to be concerned. Maybe there was a world where the anger that now blinded him to caution had saved him when he'd needed it. Maybe it could save his brother now, even if it only disrupted and distracted long enough to allow Mikey to escape on his own.

By the time he was at the door, the flunkies had called for backup and received it. His sais were out. Three ran to meet him, raising their weapons—their very large, semiautomatic weapons. All three went down before they'd fired a shot. Someone else found himself too close to aim, and swung at him with his gun. Raph caught the barrell and rammed the butt into the gangster's teeth. More came, and the familiar haze of rage fell over him.

He saw the world in black and red, shadows of night and blood in his vision sealing translucent glass over his sight. His mind was devoid of words; an inhuman, shrill, ethereal roar of primal rage drowned out thought and dimmed the senses. He couldn't tell if he was actually uttering the scream or if it was only in his brain, a product of seven months spent without a face to put to his enemy. If conquered every corner of his mind, until there was no room even for Michelangelo.

But this was never about Mikey, was it?

Suddenly, he was aware of his feet on the ground. His vision cleared, and he saw his enemies fallen like cut grass around him. He had run out of things to kill. His grip on his sais was sticky and slippery. A few heartbeats later, he became aware of pain in his upper left arm, near his shoulder. Passively, he noticed he was bleeding his life out through two bullet wounds there.

Shit. Oh Shit.

The abating adrenaline began to return. His knees buckled. *Shot. I'm shot. I've been shot.* The blood poured from his face straight through the wounds. His stomach cramped hard, and he didn't know if he was going to throw up before he passed out. He was barely aware of how long it took before he was on his knees on the concrete. Concrete, but it suddenly felt like asphalt, rough and greasy with oil and slick with his own blood.

I'm shot. I'm down.

Fear, the numbing power, the faceless entity, robbed him of his senses once more, horribly, just as it had the night when he'd last taken a bullet. Casey had been there, and he's still ended up face-down on the asphalt, subdued by pain, blood loss, three gangsters and their vendetta. Now his hands pressed flat against the concrete, fighting to keep him from falling on his face again. Even then, his face was chafed with the phantom sensation of asphalt. His cramping stomach finally expelled its contents when the pain in his arm was translated into the crushing grip of thick, meaty fingers. Someone's shins pinned his calves, and the feel of cold metal between his thighs--

His right hand seized his left arm and clamped around the wounded flesh. A roar of pain tore from him, but a spike of clarity pierced his mind. The haze disappeared from his eyes, and the prickle of asphalt faded. He was kneeling on the concrete with eight Purple Dragons lying around him. Eight, and two bullet wounds. It had only taken one bullet and five enemies last time.

It ain't "last time," 'cause this ain't a second time. This is different. I'm different.

But they're still your enemy.

They got my bro.

But this isn't about Mikey.

It was always about Mikey, and the others. But it's also about me, an' everyone in that building who's gonna die for what they did, an' what they're tryin' ta do. What I couldn't keep them from doing.

The bullets had simply grazed his flesh. The wounds were deep and bleeding profusely, at least one was deep enough to have exposed muscle. *FUCK, THAT HURTS.* Slow, deep breaths cooled his body and cleared his mind somewhat. If the wounds were bandaged, he would estimate he had at least ten minutes before he passed out from blood loss. In those ten minutes, he would take out as many as

he could, whether or not they were between him and Mikey. Every Purple Dragon in the building was going to die if he wasn't cut down first. Vengeance was a bloody cycle, but it would end here. None of them would live to hurt him or his family again.

He ripped a sleeve off one of the gangsters' shirts, grimacing in pain as he tightened it around his arm. His teeth gnashed as he tied it off, breathing hard and wiping the sweat out of his eyes. He forced his hand to close around one of his sai, though his fingers ached in protest. Gripping his weapons, he pushed to his feet, shoving the pain as far from his mind as possible. He had work to do.

Raphael had killed many people over the course of his seventeen years, but tonight, for the first time, he would become a murderer.

As he fell, he realized he had misjudged the distance he was falling . There was one frozen, breathless moment he had to think of this before he crashed into his brother.

Then it was a tangle of limbs and bodies fighting against the power of momentum to rise. As soon as a quick glance told him Leo was okay, Don rolled to his knees and began sweeping up handfuls of the white tests that had scattered from the tipped, damaged box. The alarm blared overhead as he jammed them into the crook of his arm. He really only needed a few, but his instincts told him to be safe, to take as many as he could while he could so he wouldn't have to risk a second trip. He dripped with them as he jerked to his feet, snatching the first part of Leo he saw—his shoulder—and twisting him around in blind panic. "The roof!" he gasped.

Up the shelves again, and the tests kept escaping his grasp. *It's okay. I took more than I needed.* Up, and up, and up, and he was at the top again, glancing down to make sure Leo had followed him. The height made him dizzy. *I fell that far? Am I hurt?*

Leo was already yanking a grate from a large vent. Don leapt up and caught the edge, pulling himself in with difficulty and still clutching

the last three tests in one hand. He jammed one sideways between his teeth to make sure he had at least one by the time they were out of here. Using his feet and his free hand, he shimmied up the duct as quickly as possible. Below, he heard Leo follow him and close the vent. Above, he heard the faint sounds of sirens.

Shit. The truck.

He burst into free air, crawling out of the duct like it was his own coffin. He still had two tests. He wished he had three. Belatedly, he realized he should have jammed them into his belt. He spit out the one in his mouth and rapidly did so with both the ones he had left. Behind him, Leo was coming out of the duct. He had two tests in his belt. Fantastic. Even when he was the one in crisis, he was more collected than Don.

Come to think of it, Leo had handled this entire evening better than Don. It meant one of two things: either he was simply staying calm, or the turbulence on the inside would explode at any time. That wasn't very reassuring.

Flashing red and blue lights were headed their way. Don sensed Leo duck down low and followed suit. The truck was parked right by the warehouse, and a mysterious vehicle pulling away near a recently-robbed warehouse would cause suspicion. *I should have parked further away. Shit, shit, shit.*

The police car parked by the warehouse, lights still flashing. Two men stepped out at a rather leisurely pace—maybe they had false alarms all the time. They went out of sight as Don followed Leo down the fire escape on the far side of the building. As they descended, Don's heart slowly crawled back out of his mouth. *We'll be okay. We're ninja. Actions that seem frantic and hasty to us are actions they can't even see.* Sometimes he didn't give himself enough credit for that.

They got into the truck as casually as possible. Don couldn't stop watching the flashing lights. The police had already gone inside. He

started the truck. They had to get away before the police came out again. He slowly pulled out. "What do you think they'll think?" he asked nervously.

"The police?" Don felt his brother shrug. "The box fell off the shelf. Probably 'Why do they keep calling us to check up on shit like this?'"

Don nodded, reassured, glancing briefly at the tests in Leo's belt. "Thanks for picking those up."

Leo was already leaning back in his seat, arms balanced equally on the arm rests, eyes halfway drifted closed. "It doesn't matter. It won't make a difference in whether I have five years or one hundred."

Red light. Don frowned. "In five years, you probably won't even have symptoms. HIV is a scary diagnosis, but it's not instant death."

"It is to me," Leo said softly.

Don glanced at him sharply. "What do you mean?" he asked, hoping Leo was speaking metaphorically.

He gritted his teeth when his phone rang. Leo's words caused a belated spike of alarm in his head, and he was half-tempted to ignore the ringing. Leo's eyes opened fully, however, and slid toward Don. "I'll take it," he said softly. Don handed him the phone. Leo flipped it open and held it to his ear. "Hello?" His face was passive, then shifted slightly, his eye ridges drawing down a fraction of an inch and his mouth tightening. "Yes?"

There was a longish pause. Leo's face slowly became less irritated and more focused, his tense features barely shifting into something more intense and less internalized. It was a subtle change, almost undetectable to anyone who didn't know him, but it meant something serious. "On your voicemail? What did—" There was another pause, and Leo's lips tightened, his face becoming very grave. "Casey. Let me talk."

Casey? Don suddenly understood Leo's irritation. Although Raph and Casey were now on good terms, Leo had never quite released the last traces of his grudge against Casey—not, Don believed, for carelessly allowing Raph to remain in the situation that ended in his rape, but for being the one Raph ultimately went to for help. In a way, Leo was more obsessed with setting things right than Don, but not out of a desire to fix things. At heart, Leo had a sort of mother hen complex and wanted to be everyone's savior, everyone's protector, everyone's hero. Casey hadn't consciously robbed him of this, but Leo resented him nonetheless.

Apparently, Casey hadn't let him talk, and Leo's face was transitioning from irritated to mildly angry. "Casey. Where?" Another pause. "That's in Jersey. Don and I have the truck. We'll make it. You stay home and wait—CASEY!"

Don actually jumped when Leo shouted. Granted, his brother was certainly allowed to be volatile tonight of all nights, but he was unused to hearing Leo simply explode. His brother's face was on fire. "Last time there was a crisis," Leo hissed, "you failed. You're fucking useless to us. *Stay home* ."

Don couldn't bear to see his brother like this. He wanted to tighten a bolt and make it stop. *But I can't fix you. I can't fix anyone.*

Leo snapped the phone shut and whirled on Don. "Lincoln Tunnel. Now."

Don made a sudden left on a yellow light without signaling. The woman who almost ran into him gave him three seconds of horn. "What's going on?"

But Leo was already dialing something on his phone. He held it to his ear and was quiet for a moment. "Mike's in trouble," he said quickly. "Raph went after him. Purple Dragon HQ."

No way. Not tonight. Don depressed the accelerator as his stomach turned. *I can't handle more than one brother in crisis.* He took a deep

breath. Leo needed him. But now, Mike and Raph needed him more. They also needed Leo. Tonight.

His hands tightened on the steering wheel. *Tonight it is, then,* he thought as though he had a choice.

Chapter 6

Michelangelo's would-be rapist had the most stunned, enraged look on his face when his intended victim's unchained foot broke free of his grip and kicked him in the face. Then the other foot was free, and with the dexterity of a monkey, Mike tossed the key to one hand and unlocked his wrists just as the other gangsters were upon him.

It was more out of sheer panic than years of training that he fought. Elbow to one eye, striking paralyzing pressure points, flip, kick, jab, gouge, *fight for your life, oh god, oh god, oh god.* All he could see was the door, larger than life, as far as the sun and as close as its light. Once he saw a clear shot, he ran for it.

Bursting out the door was like finally being able to breathe again. The room before him was a massive gym with a floating walkway overhead. He could feel himself being followed as he jerked from the oppressive box of the room behind him. Purple Dragons peeled away from their workouts and stared. Mike cut sharply to the right as they jerked to their feet, and he sprinted over the floor and into the only open door he could see. He slammed the door behind him, holding it shut as he breathlessly locked the doorknob.

Whirling around, his eyes focused on where he was. It looked like a storage room of sorts. He didn't pay attention to that so much as the window across the room from him.

A window.

A huge slam came from the other side of the door, knocking Mike forward. He used the motion to propel himself forward. His fingers locked around the bottom edge of the window. It came up. *Yes!* his mind crowed in triumph as he climbed out into the open air. It was only about four stories down. He could--

Something exploded in the air. He gave a shout and scrambled upward, reaching for the next window as gunfire began beneath him. He was going up, not down, but it was Somewhere Else, somewhere away from the gunfire and marauding Purple Dragons. At least for now. Catching the sill with the fingers of both hands, he briefly wondered how it was possible that he hadn't been shot yet. *Unless they're not shooting at me. Not like I'm gonna risk thinking that.*

The window came open and he climbed through, gasping in relief to see that the room he had just entered was unoccupied. He slammed the window back down, then brushed his eyes over his surroundings. It was a living room. A doorway leading to a bedroom marked it as a suite. Everything was utilitarian—simple king-sized bed, stainless steel sinks, bright white walls, firm black carpet. No extras. No music playing, but there were shouts coming from the door opposite him. Mike swallowed and dashed for the closet when he heard one voice coming closer.

"Then if you don't find him, it'll be your head that rolls!"

The door opened. Mike ducked into the closet. There wasn't enough time to close the closet door without making a noticeable sound, so it was left cracked open.

Hun walked in. His entire face was bright scarlet as he slammed the door shut, causing violent quakes to ripple through the room. *Oh shit. Of all places, I picked Hun's room. Shit, shit, shit.* Mike closed his eyes briefly, trying to make his panting as quiet as possible in spite of his laboring heart. After a moment, he held his breath. The edges of his vision went blurry, but his heart began to slow.

The leader of the Purple Dragons sat down hard in front of a stainless steel vanity. From a drawer, he pulled a foot-square three-dimensional grid. Mike's eyes widened as Hun opened one of the smaller boxes in the grid and dumped its contents into his massive hand.

Pills.

That thing was a pill box.

Mike took a breath, held it for a heartbeat, then forced himself to breathe normally. Hun cupped in his hand what would be a fistful of pills for a normal person. One was the size of a horse pill, while the others varied in size. He downed the biggest one first with a swig from a flask—probably whiskey. The rest he tossed back in one go, then sank back into the chair, resting his head in his hands.

The world froze. *Holy crap. Hun's in pain.*

The throbbing in Mike's ears became muffled white noise. His mouth slowly opened to form a wide O. He was barely aware of his surroundings as trickles of sympathy chilled his sweating body. Niggling the back of his mind was a special on TV he'd seen with Raph and Don. It had been about the life of Andre the Giant. Threaded throughout the biographical program had been the dark prison of his disease, a rare disorder that had kept him growing throughout his entire life, crippling him in the end, causing him constant, excruciating pain, and ultimately making his heart and kidneys shut down.

Hadn't Casey been told to steal a kidney for Hun?

Had surgeons and organs been more easily come by while Hun had served the Shredder?

Now Mike understood.

A low, agonized growl rose from Hun's hunched-over form. One huge hand passed over the veins standing out in his damp, crimson forehead. He blew out his breath in a flood of a hiss and raised his eyes.

They landed directly on Mike.

Shit!

Mike ducked behind the closet door. *Stupid, stupid, stupid!* his mind screamed at him.

"You!"

His heart exploded in his ears. There was nowhere to go. Hun came crashing into the closet. Mike ducked into the circle of the gangster's outreaching arms and grasped both meaty shoulders, propelling himself upward. A hand grasped his leg and yanked him downwards. An arm curled around his neck. He twisted, trying to break free, but was crushed back against his captor. The arm around his neck tightened, then lifted him off the floor. He couldn't breathe. He struggled and grasped at the arm, trying to pull himself upwards and free his windpipe from the pressure as he was carried out of the closet. His legs swung and kicked and kicked and kicked and kicked. A door opened. Suddenly he was on his feet again, able to breathe. Hun's arm was still around his neck, and his other hand gripped Mike's upper arm. They were on the mezzanine over the gigantic gym. A few yards from Mike's feet were the stairs to the lower level, which was swamped with Purple Dragons. They were approaching from both sides on the mezzanine, some faces contorted with anger, some with excitement. It was a sea of leering faces, a roar of meaningless noise.

"QUIET!" bellowed Hun.

Michelangelo was known to freeze when in a state of panic.

"YOU LAZY CUNTS!"

Contrary to what some assumed, Mikey's mind didn't exactly go blank whenever he froze in panic. Instead, all the thoughts in his head, all the possibilities for action, became too loud for him to hear any of them. It was a dull roar of chaos, a canon of rising and falling voices, all speaking a language he was too preoccupied to listen to. As he tried to push his own solo voice through the thick, unyielding bog of thought without sense, the world sped up around him. There was no time, just the universe fast-forwarding through the movie of

his last moments and the horrible knowledge that he was powerless to stop it all.

This was the point where someone always saved him.

But no one was here now, dashing through the sea of leering faces. He couldn't feel his own body except for the violent vibrations wracking through it, but was dimly aware of Hun's crushing grip and the arm locked around his neck. He could hear the rush of his own panicked breathing and nothing else.

I don't want to die. But I can't stop it. Raph couldn't stop it.

"LOOK AT WHAT I FOUND IN MY QUARTERS, YOU LAZY FUCKERS!"

Fire and ice. Fire and ice. Fire in his chest, ice in his skin. Hun's hold on his neck tightened, and Mikey's breath was cut off. The lump of ice in his chest ached. Hun's beefy arm was so huge, wedged between his collarbone and his chin, that his head was tilted back too far. His neck craned, and he saw the blank, shadowed ceiling.

Oh god, please don't make this be the last thing I see. In a way, leering faces might be preferable to the ceiling cutting him off from the sky and escape. *Walled in. Trapped. Limited. Helpless.*

"YOU LET HIM GO," Hun continued, a gargantuan voice pummeling the sides of Mike's head. "YOU LOST THE RIGHT TO KILL HIM."

Mikey's mouth opened as his lungs yanked at the air. Hun's arm around his throat blocked him from gasping in a breath, and pain shot through his chest like many branches of lightning. Cold steel slid against his carotid artery, in the razor-thin space between Hun's arm and Mike's chin. Cold and edged. A blade.

"MACCOOL!" screamed a voice from below.

The barked order was not from a voice he recognized, but soon after, MacCool's familiar voice rang out with a chirped, "Ha!"

Something clattered to the floor near Mike's feet.

"Holy shit," hissed Hun.

Suddenly Mike was plummeting to the floor, thrown down, the wind knocked out of him. Something punched him in the plastron as he landed, hitting right against the ice rock in his chest. His hands slapped against the smooth, cold concrete of the floor, but he barely felt the sting. The fact that he could suddenly breathe again overruled everything else. Something in the back of his brain screamed that whatever he had landed on, he had to get off it. Whatever it was, Hun had thrown him on top of it just as he was about to—

It was a grenade.

It was a grenade, and he knew he should move. But the cacophony in his head had the control. It locked his limbs and froze his mind. One voice stood out from the others—Raph's voice in his head, screaming, *Mikey, move! MOVE!* It was pressure, it was panic, it only made things worse. He already knew he had to move. He had to move, and he couldn't.

"MOVE!"

Something hard slammed into his side. Arms wrapped around him and another body rolled off the grenade with him. Sudden impact with one stair, two, three, and they were rolling down the stairs and the brief explosion of the grenade shot over their heads. They stopped, and the quivering arms enfolding Michelangelo tightened, the familiar body blocking him until the room began to move again.

"Raph," breathed Mike.

The strong arms jerked him to his feet. His knees nearly gave way. Raph's face was uncharacteristically pale, but familiarly grim. "Stay low," he said hoarsely.

Still gasping, Mike planted his feet apart and tightened his fists. No way he was going to let Raph take on the entire population of the Purple Dragons by himself, especially when he saw the bloodied sleeve around Raph's arm. Suddenly he knew who those guards had been shooting at when he'd been hanging from the window outside, and a spike of fear ran through him.

"You're hurt."

Raph's sais were out, and he had turned his back to Mike. "Never mind. Stay low. If you get yourself killed, I came here for nothin'."

Mike didn't need to point out that Raph was much more likely to get killed. Raph probably knew it already. *All that blood* . He turned his back against Raph's. At least two dozen gangsters were descending the stairs. Behind him were at least four dozen. He changed his mind —he had as good a chance as Raph, no better. Not while this sea of enemies swirled around two weakened warriors.

This time, there was no panic, just a cold fear washing over his burning skin.

They were light years from being out of this, but they were together.

Chapter 7

It had been pure luck. Raph had barely seen a figure climbing the building in his peripheral vision. Once this new wave of enemies was defeated, he followed the figure. Chased a ghost. He had come through the window the same way as his brother, but he hadn't made it that far until Hun already had Mike.

Raphael held his brother as though raising a wall around him. His heart pounded like timpani in his ears. His arms tightened, pressing Michelangelo close enough to him that, through the leather-stiff plastron, Raphael found the fluttering heart he had first discovered when they were nine years old.

"Raph."

He was alive. Michelangelo was alive.

But was he hurt?

Raph yanked his brother to his feet when he had just barely made it to his own. The room was moving around them as scores of Purple Dragons realized what had happened, but Raph couldn't lift a finger against them until his eyes had swept up and down his brother twice. Both times, his eyes caught Mike's legs in particular. No blood. None. They hadn't hurt him—not like that.

He could have passed out from relief.

"Stay low," Raph said in what was meant to be a growl, but came out as a whisper. He pulled out his sais and spun away from his brother.

"You're hurt."

Apparently Raph hadn't been the only one giving a brother a look-over. "Never mind. Stay low. If you get yourself killed, I came here for nothin'."

Mikey, if you get yourself killed right after I rescued you, I'll use your comic books to line Klunk's litter box.

That thought caused Raph's breath to hitch.

Right after I rescued you.

I rescued...

Not yet I didn't.

His grip tightened on his weapons. They weren't out of here yet. In fact, they probably wouldn't get out of here at all.

Electricity and shadows. Rectangles of darkness dotted with bright squares. Hastily-scribbled neon cursive. Fog and concrete.

A steady pattern of golden lights. They were in the tunnel. Everything around him blurred more than before as he focused on what was ahead, as if he could will himself forward faster, magically flying over the traffic and landing a short way down the coast, right in front of the Purple Dragons' headquarters.

He was still stuck going forty-five through a crowded Lincoln Tunnel, no matter how badly he wanted to burst out ahead of everyone in front of him. He could feel the veins standing out in his temples. *Does everyone always go this slow? What the fuck is wrong with them?*

I have to save my brother this time.

I just got the second chance I've been living for, and we're stuck in traffic.

Stuck in traffic.

"GET DOWN!" Raph bellowed as at least a dozen Purple Dragons raised their guns. *No way we're making it out of here, but Mikey won't go down before I do.*

Don leaned against the horn, knowing it wouldn't do any good.

Raph threw himself into the midst of the gangsters at the foot of the stairs, and to his frustration, he heard Mikey dive in the opposite direction, toward those on the steps. *At least he'll go down fighting, too.*

You're such a fatalist.

Shut up.

"MOVE!" Don screamed needlessly at the traffic in the tunnel.

The Purple Dragons opened fire behind him. Mike whirled around, mouth open to shout something to Raph, but he forgot what it was as his eyes came up to see the windows exploding.

Purple Dragon Headquarters. A lot fancier than it used to be. Look how shiny.

It was like a glass box glowing gold, wasn't it?

Look at all those windows. I wanna bust 'em.

Through the windows he could see a cloud of people gathered on the third floor.

That's where they'll be.

It wasn't recommended to use a car as a ramp and simply *hope* you would make it to where you wanted before momentum failed you and

left you smeared over the pavement. Not that physics ever deterred Casey Jones.

The glass behind his enemies bubbled outward, then burst into a host of stars, deafening him in a shattering wave of a million high-pitched notes before raining musically to the gym floor. Raph instinctively yanked himself backward, stumbling into Mike. There was the roar of an engine, the slam and subsequent squeak of rubber skidding over hardwood, and the sudden realization that he needed to be running forward, not back.

Casey's bike slammed to the floor, but not with Casey on it. He and Splinter were already in the air as the bike skidded over the floor, crashed onto its side, and flew into the crowd of stunned gangsters, trailing the smell of chafed rubber. Casey landed before Splinter, lifting an Uzi and letting loose with a hail of bullets noisier than the glass had been. Splinter was running as soon as he landed, his footsteps drowned out by Casey's volley, moving through the confusion as the Purple Dragons switched their focus to a new enemy. Before Raph had time to unfreeze, Splinter had leveled the gangsters between him and his sons and was shouting something Raph couldn't make out.

Probably something about getting the hell out of here, Raph thought as he gritted his teeth. That wasn't going to happen. Raphael had a mission he'd chosen before setting foot in this building.

The Purple Dragons had raped him as revenge for giving them so much trouble in the past. Leo had killed House out of revenge for Raphael's rape. Now the Purple Dragons were trying to use Mike to avenge the deaths of House and the other gangsters who'd died for the rape. This would be the last loop in the cycle of vengeance, the final and everlasting peace between him and his enemies. They weren't going to hurt him or his family again.

Even if it meant his death.

"Get out of here, Mikey," he shouted hoarsely, barely able to hear himself over the noise.

"You--" Mike probably spoke aloud, but Raph could only see his mouth move.

Raph turned and seized him by the wrist, causing his brother to yelp in pain, and flung him toward their sensei. "GET THE FUCK OUT!" he screamed as the bullets in the air choked his words. The Purple Dragons had recovered and were now firing at Casey, who had found a bench press machine and had crouched behind the weights, ducking out occasionally to fire. There was too much noise to think. Raphael gave his brother a final shove before whirling to face his enemies.

"Get Mikey outta here!" he shouted to his sensei, hoping he could hear. He dived at a gangster leveling a gun at him, plunging his weapons into the soft flesh adjoining his neck and shoulders before he could fire.

"Raph!" came the distant sound of Michelangelo's high-pitched shouting.

Raph punched a Purple Dragon in the teeth, simultaneously using the point of his sai to slash across his throat. The gangster went down with a gurgle. The blood pounded into Raph's head and out through his wounded arm, louder than the bullets pounding the air. He gnashed his teeth and lunged at two more Dragons who were coming after him, kicking one of them down and yanking his AR-15 from his grip. *No one alive. No one.*

"Raph!"

There were so many. Raph raised the gun, not even sure how to use it. The sound was crippling, each of the hundreds of gunshots around him thudding against his heartbeat, pushing the breath from his lungs. It was deadly, terrifying, and thrilling. He almost could have

cried for the sheer aesthetic beauty of its poetry. This was exactly how he wanted to go out.

"RAPH!"

A hand closed around his arm where it was bandaged and yanked him backward. A roar of pain tore from Raph's throat, piercing the poem of gunshots, and he swung the assault rifle at this new attacker. Michelangelo ducked and the blow sailed over his head. Raph froze suddenly, captured by the frantic look on his brother's face that made everything else go still and quiet as a library. It made him feel even deafer than before, being suddenly unable to sense a thing but that wide-eyed, split-lipped, noiseless plea.

"We have to go! *Please!* " Michelangelo was babbling.

It was a moment before Raph even thought to turn back around, pointing the rifle at his advancing enemies, but he did not fire. His eyes flickered back to his brother, then to his enemies again.

Mikey needs to go home.

Mikey's not leaving.

"Raph!"

Why the hell is he still here?

Raphael saw his brother's face, saw his tormentors.

They tormented Mikey, too. They will for a long time.

I need to go with him. Mikey needs me to keep him safe. Mikey needs me to come home.

That's what this was about in the first place. Keeping his family safe.

I can do that now. But not like this.

"Raphael!" Splinter's voice now. "Listen to us! Ignore them! They are not important!"

Raph could have laughed. *So that's how to kill your enemies, right? Pretend they're unimportant. That works until they show up with a grenade launcher.*

But right now, they weren't as important as Mike.

The world suddenly started again, the poem of bullets smashing against his eardrums once more. Now it was just noise, no longer a thrill. It was quieter, more sporadic than before as the Purple Dragons ran out of bullets. Raph turned and ran toward the shattered windows, following his brother and his father.

Casey, by now, had fought his way out from behind the exercise equipment and was side-stepping his way to the others. A bullet had barely grazed his cheekbone, just enough to draw blood that ran impressively down his jaw and throat, staining his collar like the bright lipstick of a lover. Raph halted as their flight brought them to the window, three stories above the ground. He whirled around again, experimentally throwing off a stream of bullets. Few of them hit flesh.

"Damn," muttered Raph. *I'm as crappy a shot as they are.*

A foot grabbed his ankle, and he nearly fell backwards.

"Down here," shouted Donatello's voice from beneath him. Looking down, Raph saw his brother clinging to the floor with one hand and offering him a rope with the other. "Tie that to something. We'll get you down."

"Where's Leo?" demanded Raph.

"Taking the stairs."

Raph grabbed the rope and tossed it aside. "Don't need a fucking rope, Don," he snarled. "We gotta get outta here. Where the FUCK is Leo?"

His question was answered when he heard—and felt—the explosion. He nearly toppled through the window when the stairs, carrying at least half the remaining Purple Dragons, burst outward, splitting in half and crumbling to the floor. Concrete dust billowed through the air. Raph blinked it out of his eyes and suddenly heaved it out of his lungs as he glanced around frantically, searching for and finally finding Leonardo. His oldest brother was twenty feet away from the stairs, crouched defensively behind an exercise bike. A chunk of concrete sailed past Raph's head, but he paid it no heed as he dashed for his brother's side.

Leo was apparently checking himself over for wounds as Raph arrived. He glanced up. "Is Mikey--"

"He's okay," Raph breathed, then coughed, scanning Leo for any sign of injury. He was bleeding from a shallow scalp wound, probably caused by flying debris, but otherwise seemed fine. "You come up with that?"

Leo grinned. "TNT in their weapons room. Couldn't pass it up."

Raph nodded. "Thanks. Lemme get something for your head." He snatched a towel hanging from one of the handlebars on the bike. It smelled horribly of sweat.

Leo's eyes widened. "For my..." His hand flew up to the wound on his head.

"Don't touch it," Raph warned, approaching him with the towel.

Leo took a sudden, uncertain wobble backwards, snatched the towel out of Raph's hand like it had been stolen from him, and pressed it to the wound. "Stay away," he croaked.

Raph reached forward, frowning deeply. "What the f--"

All at once, Leo's demeanor did a U-turn. He rocketed to his feet, eyes wide, stumbling backward, every drop of blood drained from his face. "STAY AWAY!" he shouted, stumbling backwards. "DON'T TOUCH THE BLOOD!"

Author's Note: I'm so sorry this took so long.

Chapter 8

First, there was an explosion. Then, Raph wasn't there anymore. Mike looked around wildly, momentarily wondering if he'd gone crazy as thousands of stimuli overwhelmed his brain. One more brought him to himself—a hand seizing his heel as he stood against one of the shattered windows. He shrieked, yanking his heel away from the unexpected grip and twisting to see who it was.

It was Don, clinging to the windowsill and hanging there, feet planted on the side of the building. "We gotta go!" he gasped. "Come on down."

"Raph--" Mike began in protest.

"--came here to save you," Don finished for him. "Just like the rest of us. Don't make us do it twice."

Mike's face twisted briefly in guilty contemplation as he glanced back in the direction Raph had run. If their positions were reversed, Raph would have come after him. *Raph has the guts to do things like that. Don's right. I'm not Raph.* Gritting his teeth, he turned and leapt from the window, catching himself on another window halfway before hitting the ground running.

The van was parked on the lawn outside. Mike could see the marks where the wheels had torn through the grass. He paused to look back. Don was following about a hundred feet behind him, and Casey was dangling from the window. Mike halted at the van, eyes wide, heart throbbing cold water into his head. *Please, Raph. Don't make everyone come after you. Not this time.*

If there was anything in life that Mike wanted, it was to never go back into that building again.

Casey made it to the ground and was half-running, half jogging backwards as he checked for followers. Don reached the van and yanked the door open, shouting for Mike to get in. Mike didn't want to get in. Why were Don and Casey retreating before everyone else was out? They weren't leaving without the others, right?

Unless the others couldn't follow them.

Mike turned his head to face Don. Don looked furious and on the verge of physical force. His mouth was moving, but Mike wasn't listening. What wasn't Don telling him?

Suddenly Don grabbed him by his arms and shoved him into the van. Mike stumbled over something—one of Don's toolboxes—and sat down hard on the floor just as three familiar silhouettes appeared at the window they had just climbed out of. That was when he realized he hadn't been breathing. He nearly went limp on the floor, but instead scuttled back to make room for Don, kicking the toolbox out of the way. Stars danced in front of his eyes when he blinked, and through the ringing in his ears, he could still hear the sounds of bullets, even though he knew the fight to be over.

It's over.

"Are you hurt?" Don asked him, looking him point blank in the face.

For a second, Mike could hardly believe he was being asked the question. *Nah. I spent the last three fucking hours with the Purple Dragons and guess what? They have a hot tub! And one of those rooms filled with plastic balls! Boy, was it FUN!* He had neither the breath nor the presence of mind to speak this out loud, and for a moment wanted to say *Yes* , but he knew how that would be misconstrued. "No."

Don gave him a sharp nod and shot to his feet, making for the driver's seat. Casey had paused to make sure the other three got into the van before him. Raph climbed in first, stumbling and clutching his wounded arm. Splinter followed, then Casey, then a

dazed-looking Leo, who was holding a towel to his head. Leo shrunk into the furthest corner as Casey shut the door. Don stepped on the gas, and the van jerked forward.

Raph sank down in front of Mike, breathless and pale. "You...you okay?"

Before Mike could lie again, his brother found evidence to the contrary. Raph seized Mike's forearms and examined his wrists. "Fuck. *Fuck.* Casey, bring me the..." Raph's eyes unfocused for a fraction of a second, nearly causing Mike to jump up in alarm. "The thing."

Splinter was already by his side, holding the first aid kit. "You first, Raphael," he said like he meant business. "Leonardo will take care of Michelangelo."

"No," Leo said dazedly.

Splinter glanced sharply over at him, but did not slow down as he ripped the first aid kit open and began to pull out supplies. "Casey. Examine Leonardo's head wound."

"No!" Leo repeated more firmly, lashing out at Casey with a foot when the man approached him.

"Leonardo!" Splinter barked.

"Don't touch him!" Don called back from the front.

The world was slowly becoming less and less real to Michelangelo. He heard but did not entirely comprehend the voices around him. It frightened him that he was not frightened by what he heard.

"Stay away!"

"Leo, what--"

"Leonardo! Donatello! What is going on?"

Mike watched distantly as Raphael swayed. Or maybe he was the one swaying. Wasn't that weird?

"Leo?" the voice might have been Don's.

"I don't want them to know."

"They'll know sooner or later."

Know what?

The tip of Leo's tongue came out and ran slowly over his lips. His eyes were wide and blank—no, not blank, but completely filled with only one thing. Fear. The kind of fear one is helpless against. The kind of fear Michelangelo was now intimate with.

"Please, Don," Leo said in a rough, distant voice, as though his mind were thousands of miles away. "Please tell them."

"I'm driving. I can't even look them in the eye like they deserve."

"Leonardo?" Splinter said sharply.

"I have HIV."

What?

Splinter, focused on Raph, suddenly whipped around, his fur bristling like he was faced with a threat, but his face was torn with disbelief. Casey's jaw dropped. Raph's eyes shattered like mirrors.

"You—you what? HOW THE HELL IS THAT *POSSIBLE* ?" Casey shouted.

"No," Don immediately said from the front. "House had HIV. We just found out. Since Leo came into contact with House's blood, we're doing a couple of tests to make sure he's not infected."

The voices around him were starting to develop an echo. Mike shifted, sitting crosslegged with his arms resting on his knees, hands dangling into his lap. *Leo might have HIV. Leo might have HIV.* It wasn't registering. There was too much in his brain, all packed in and surrounded with bubble wrap like a box of delicate items. His wrists and ankles were burning him slowly, remnants of the lesson he learned tonight, the breaking point of his trust in humanity, the rag that smeared the order of a world he had thought was a pretty good place to be in. He watched his shaking brother, his *otouto-san* , his Fearless Leader, and couldn't help but wonder at how even Leonardo's skin seemed a different color now. The voice of his father and sensei seemed to have an old, bitter quality he hadn't heard before. A strange feeling came over him like someone had placed a heavy blanket over his shoulders: was any of this real? Was he hallucinating and still lying bound hand and foot in a tiny room being raped to death? Or had any of this night happened at all? It seemed like a dark, hazy dream; even the burning in his wrists and ankles seemed unreal. Maybe he wasn't real, either.

"This can't be real." He wasn't sure if he thought it or said it aloud.

He felt, or thought he felt, his father's hand on his shoulder. He looked up through the haze to see Splinter's eyes.

"When does it stop?" he asked him.

"When does it stop?"

Raph opened one eye and peered at Michelangelo. He had been relaxing in his lightly-swinging hammock when he heard his brother's voice and drifted back down from his high. "Mikey," he mumbled, unable to manage anything stronger, "I bled out half my...blood. 'M so doped up I don't know where th' fuck I am, 'n you 'spect me to know what th' hell you're talkin' 'bout?" He closed his eyes again—not that he had much of a choice.

"The numbness. When does it go away?"

Raph grunted. "Leo might have HIV an' that's what you're worried 'bout?"

"Kind of. I mean, I'm worried about Leo. I'm just not...freaked out. And that freaks me out."

Raph sloppily waved a hand at him. "It'll go away after a while. Days. Weeks. Whatever it takes b'fore you realize you're safe again. Don't worry 'bout it. Enjoy it."

"I don't think I'll enjoy it."

"It's better'n feelin' everything you're not ready t' feel." Raph took a deep breath and squirmed, aching with exhaustion. "C'n we talk about this some other time?"

"Yeah."

Raph heard his brother walk away. Sleep began to draw him into blackness, but he forced himself to speak again, knowing on some level that it was important. "Mikey?"

A pause. "Yeah?"

"The key ta livin' after somethin' like this happens is t' not die. Your life'll come back. You just gotta live till it does."

Another pause. "Thanks."

"If I tell you that again sometime, it's 'cause I won't remember me sayin' it now. Now go get some rest."

The look on Leo's face told Don his brother believed he was a goner.

"You ready?" Don asked him softly.

"No," Leo said immediately. "I..." He bowed his head. "I'm not ready for this. I've been trying to accept it, be at peace with it, but I can't do

that."

"Give yourself time."

"It's not a matter of time, Don. It's everything I am—to you guys, and to myself—and it's all compromised, all shot to hell because of this."

Don shook his head. "Who you are to us will never change, not for this or anything else. Leo, if you're infected, we'll all have to come to terms with it eventually."

There was a long pause, then Leo glanced up at Don. His look had changed somehow—no longer scared and hollow, but suddenly straightforward and focused. His eyes narrowed, his jaw set, and his lips tightened into a grim line, curved slightly downward. It was the look he got before battle. "Know what, Don?" he said, his voice soft but piercing, almost a stage whisper. " *Fuck* coming to terms with it. *Fuck* disease. I'm not gonna sit here and take it. I'm fighting it every step of the way, even if there's no victory. There's no cure, but I'll find one, even if I have to go to d'Hoonib and back for it."

"It's negative."

"What?"

Don glanced up from the test, heart pounding hard in relief. "It's negative. You're not infected."

Before he could stop him, Leo snatched the test from Don's hand and stared at it himself. For a moment, he simply shook his head, then a tiny glimmering of tears began to shine over his lower eyelids. A tiny smile caressed his lips. Don grinned like a maniac at him, then threw his arms around him.

Leonardo, you faker. All that bravado and you were still scared as hell. But so was I.

"So," he whispered, "who are we gonna tell first?"

"Raph?"

Raph's eyes barely opened, revealing only dark glints between his eyelids. "Mmmmm?"

Leo smiled gently and sat gingerly on the nightstand beside his hammock. "The test results were negative. I don't have HIV."

What he saw next was miraculous—a relieved grin, free of reservation, splitting his brother's face. "'S good," he slurred. "Real good. Couldja tell me again later so I don' forget?"

A genuine laugh, a puff of air that released the cold knot that had been tightening his chest for hours, escaped Leo's lungs. "I'll make sure you know. Sleep well."

Raphael drifted off. Still smiling, Leo left him to sleep in peace. Shutting the door to his brother's bedroom, he turned to find himself face-to-face with a wide-eyed Michelangelo. Before he could react, Leonardo found himself violently hugged, with Mikey's arms thrown desperately around his torso like he was clinging to a life preserver in deep water. It was very much like the embrace he had given Leo at the end of his training, when he had come home. Don must have broken the news to the others already. Leo felt his smile bloom into a grin. Splinter stood on the steps just behind Mikey, beaming like the sun. He gave his eldest son a nod akin to a bow, and Leo returned it with reverence.

"So not everything went wrong," Michelangelo mumbled through a grin.

Leonardo pulled his brother so tightly against him that he could hardly breathe. "Not everything goes wrong, little brother."

A/N: I am so sorry this took so long. The epilogue should be up tomorrow. Thanks so much for your patience.

Epilogue

After months of drowning in fantasies about his rape, Raphael had finally had the chance to relive it, in a sense. From an outside perspective, perhaps it would have sounded twisted, but he had been burning for a chance to redo everything, to take the actions he hadn't thought to take back then, to force a different outcome. Having been given that chance, he had taken none of the actions he had imagined taking for those long, dark months of struggle. For that, he felt a disturbing lack of satisfaction.

Whenever he felt that way, he would remember catching Michelangelo with his arms and rolling him away from death.

Then he wondered if he should have thrown himself on that grenade.

For a few days, Michelangelo wandered the lair, not hollow, but blank, as though still deciding if the world was real or not. Once he made his decision, it was like a glass cage had been broken, and he was suddenly wilder than ever. Occasionally something else broke through, as though he was remembering something dark, but the moments were short, followed by forced joy until he seemed to forget all solemnity.

In Raph's experience, starting to feel again, especially grief, was simply part of the process—one Mikey was reaching faster than he had. It helped confirm that Mikey had not lied about the events of his captivity. He had already begun to piece together what had happened to him, and as he spoke, Raph had begun to remember parts of his own brief captivity that he had already forgotten, slowly digesting them and relating them to his father later. It felt a little like he was starting the process anew, albeit with less intensity.

I didn't even make it through the process in the first place before they hit the reset button on me.

But he had rescued Mikey. He had achieved victory. He wasn't helpless any longer.

What helped him?

Then it struck him that he never felt more like himself than when he was hanging out with Casey. His best friend was the first person he had begun to trust after he had been attacked. Letting his guard down and still feeling safe was more healing than any therapy session with Splinter. Reconnecting with people, re-establishing ties —that was what it was all about, wasn't it?

"Hey Mikey."

"Yeah?"

"Gotcha somethin'."

"A transformer?"

"Yeah, um. You uh, you remember when we were kids, an'…shit."

"Dude, is this the one I broke?"

"No, it's a different one, but uh…I kinda thought it'd be, like, ironic or somethin'. Finally gotcha yer own so you'd leave mine alonevermindit'sstupid."

"No it's not! It's…kinda funny, actually! I totally forgot about the whole thing. Thanks!"

"And uh…you wanna grab somethin' ta eat?"

"You mean topside?"

"Well, I figure we just proved we can kick the asses of anyone who tries to mess with us. I ain't lettin' some scum make ya too scared ta go get pizza topside with your big bro. An' I'm cravin' that weird pineapple an' pepperoni shit you like. Thanks for nothin'."

"I uh. You don't suppose we could order delivery?"

"We could, but then we couldn't stop for a movie an' ice cream afterwards."

"Um. Raph?"

"I guess we could order out an' play cards. Whaddyou think?"

"Let's…let's start small. Let's go out for pizza and come back and play cards. That sounds…kinda awesome."

"You okay, Mikey?"

"Yeah. Just makin' it through the day, right?"

"You don't hafta pretend."

"I'm not pretending, Raph. I guess…I made it, right? Nothing really bad happened, even though all kinds of horrible things could've gone wrong. They tried, but I fought 'em off, and when I couldn't, you could. It…it still scares the fuck out of me, but I'll be okay. I think we're all gonna be okay."

"What do you need, Casey?"

"Uh, hey, Leo. Is Raph there?"

"He's out with Mike."

"Uh, okay. I'll call back later."

"Just a second."

"Yeah, 'sup?"

There was a long pause.

"I really need to swallow my pride and thank you. I would've lost two brothers if it hadn't been for you. I…I owe you my life. I'm sorry."

"Um. Wow, uh. It's no problem. I mean, it's okay—uh, you're welcome. Really, don't mention it."

"So there's no problem between us."

"No! I mean, uh, that's cool. Thanks. That's, uh, a huge relief. You got not idea."

"I kinda think I do."

"Well, that's…thanks so much, man."

"Thank you."

"Uh, I'll seeya sometime, right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Uh, seeya then."

"Bye."

"Bye."

Donatello's general lack of faith in the world was beginning to be shaken. All this time, he had assumed that if something needed to be fixed, he would have to fix it. It had never set in that some things didn't need to be fixed—at least not by himself. Maybe things weren't automatically a worst-case scenario.

"We'll keep testing you every six months until we run out of tests, but I think this means we can't get HIV."

"That sounds suspiciously like optimism, Don."

"It might be."

"Quit smirking and give me a real smile, for once. You don't have to hide anything. This isn't a time to be serious. I'm okay."

"Yeah. I just…"

"Yeah?"

"I think I just realized I'm okay, too."

Some days weren't as easy for Michelangelo as others. Occasionally, when the sheer horror of what had happened caught up with him, it became difficult to do anything, or to connect with anyone.

If Hun had wanted to kill me, he could've.

If Raph hadn't been there, I'd've died. I couldn't stop it.

Did I really get tortured with a taser? How did I let that happen?

"Michelangelo. You cannot lie on the couch all day. Come join us in training and you will feel better."

"Why?"

"Exercise is good for the soul. It encourages the flow of positive chi and lifts the spirits."

"It's just treating a symptom."

"It is also involving you with your brothers. That is treating the disease. Now come."

"Sensei?"

"Yes, my son?"

"When you get older…when things like this happen to you…is it…is it even possible anymore to, like…I dunno how to say it. Like, can you ever feel really close to someone again? Like, have a really, really deep connection like you used to? Ever again?"

Michelangelo felt the cushion beside him depress as he lay on the couch. Splinter's fingers trailed over his face, gentle as the brush of a kitten's tail.

"My son. Look at me."

The effort was nearly too great for him, but Michelangelo turned his head, raising his eyes to his father. What he saw there in Splinter's eyes nearly burned him, like staring into the sun, and he couldn't look for long. It was completely incomprehensible, almost painful to see the overwhelming love in those eyes, a love he had never had to earn or deserve, still there in spite of anything that happened. His eyes flicked away, then closed. Tears misted his eyes but did not fall. Suddenly he had his arms locked around his father's neck and was burying his face in that silken robe, ten years younger in an instant. Thin but impossibly strong arms caught him and held him there, close to that warm, beating heart, and Michelangelo finally began to feel safe.

He began his first novel that evening, starting with these words:

We are not heroes. We fight for no more and no less than the daily moments, the quiet routine and the loud joy, the ability to function as a family in spite of disruption from the outside over what we are. Our quiet, unobtrusive way of life and fighting skills are usually sufficient, but when they are not, we develop the strength and character to cope. We are survivors, and we will never be alone in this world.